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FM AMEMBASSY NIAMEY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5234
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 1633
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHLMC/MCC WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000569

DEPT FOR AF/W AND AF/RSA
PLS PASS TO USAID FOR AFR/W
ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU - J MAYBURY
ACCRA ALSO FOR USAID/WA
PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: Niger: Snapshot of the August 4 Referendum

Ref: a) Niamey 00554, b) Niamey 00531, c) Niamey 00521, d) Niamey 00517, e) Niamey 00504, f) Niamey 00503

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11. Summary: On August 4, some six million Nigeriens were called to a referendum vote on a controversial new constitution that would allow President Tandja to remain in power beyond his legally-mandated term slated to end on December 22, 2009. While the referendum took place in a generally calm and peaceful atmosphere in Niamey, a few incidents were reported in some parts of the country. The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) has started receiving results from different constituencies, with 37 out of 265 reporting as of the morning of August 5. Controversy is growing about the size of the voter turnout, which is the main stake of this referendum. Various international and opposition sources report a low voter turnout, while the GON refers to a "very high" rate of participation. The CENI will compile and announce the results "within five days." End summary.

August 4: Generally Calm, with Scattered Incidents

12. On August 3, Niger's security forces had an early vote "in order to be available to ensure security on voting day," a first-time occurrence in Niger. On August 4, polling stations opened rather slowly, under high police protection due to the opposition's vow to disturb the referendum (refs A and C). Voter flow was timid and irregular throughout the day in Niamey and other regional capitals. Overall, the voting operations went peacefully; however, in the region of Dosso, there were reports that some people attempted to destroy polling stations and voting materials. Security forces arrested several opposition members, as the Minister of Interior confirmed. There were also some incidents in the region of Tahoua, where demonstrators in the towns of Illela (opposition leader Mahamadou Issoufou's hometown) destroyed polling stations and voting materials and hampered the voting process. Police used tear gas to control the crowd and arrested several opposition members.

Voter Turnout a Key Indicator of Depth of Support for Tandja

13. Voter turnout is seen as a key factor for President Tandja to claim popular support for the referendum. According to media reports citing the CENI president, the voter turnout claims vary from 40 to 90 percent. For example, the district of Arlit had a 30 percent voter turnout and 96 percent voted "yes," i.e., in favor of the new constitution. The district of Bilma noted a voter turnout of 70 percent, with 96 percent voting "yes." Finally, the village of Baoudeta saw a 34 percent turnout with 94 percent voting "yes."

¶4. Anxiety over the level of voter participation is perceptible. The opposition claims that not many people showed up to vote throughout the country, and therefore President Tandja should "draw the lessons of his failure." The spokesperson for the Front for the Defense of Democracy (FDD) stated that the opposition call for a boycott was largely observed, and that the voter turnout rate could not have exceeded eight percent. In a press conference on August 5, the Alliance of Forces for Democracy and the Republic (AFDR), the ruling party bloc, slammed foreign media that reported low voter turnout, accusing them of bias. The AFDR claimed that those reporters visited only "select" polling stations in Niamey and deliberately failed to deploy to other regions of the country, hence they could not provide an accurate picture of the overall voting process that took place in Niger. GON spokesperson Mohamed Ben Omar stated that voter turnout was "very high."

President Tandja: "Our Objective has been Obtained"

¶5. President Tandja cast his ballot in the Niamey city hall, and noted that, "It is a great day today. We thank God and the Nigerien people. Our objective has been attained. We answered the call of the people." Billboards erected on August 1 and 2 throughout Niamey urged support for the referendum; on August 4, observers noted that the billboard messages had been changed overnight to one of thanking voters for their support.

CENI to Release Results "Within Five Days"

¶6. The CENI has started receiving results from different constituencies, with 37 out of 265 reporting as of the morning of August 5. Full results are expected "within five days."

Comment:

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¶7. President Tandja held the referendum despite the opposition of key political parties, labor unions, and civil society associations, and contrary to attempts by the international community to convince him not to do so. As a consequence, international observers did not monitor the voting process, even though a group claiming to be an "observation team from the African Diaspora in Europe" thought that the vote complied with international standards. Results and further comments will follow via septel. End Comment.

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